



**ECO-DISASTERS**

# **TOXIC WATER**

**MINAMATA,  
JAPAN**



by Meish Goldish

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MINAMATA, JAPAN



by **Meish Goldish**

Consultant: September Williams, MD  
Writer and Bioethicist

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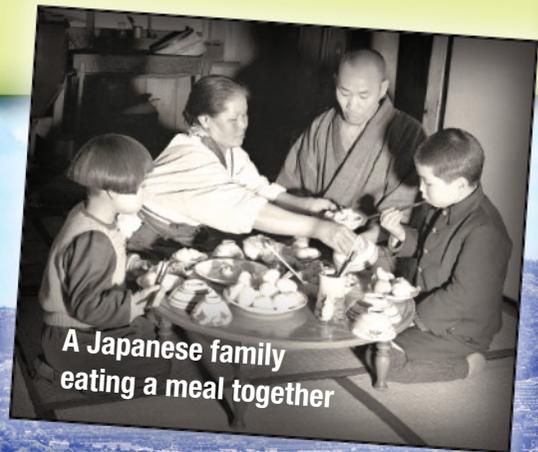
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# A Strange Disease

In April 1956 in Minamata, Japan, five-year-old Shizuko Tanaka sat down to eat with her family. As she stuck her chopsticks into a bowl of food, her tiny fingers began to tremble. By the next morning, Shizuko was seriously ill. The little girl was unable to walk, speak, or see, and her whole body shook wildly. Shizuko's mother rushed her to the hospital, but the doctors had no idea what was wrong. Two days later, Shizuko's little sister, Jitsuko, came down with the same terrifying **symptoms**.

The city of Minamata is located along Japan's southwestern coast.



A Japanese family eating a meal together

Shizuko's mother told the doctors that her neighbor's child had a similar illness. The doctors **investigated**. They soon found eight more people with the same symptoms. The hospital director reported that "an unknown disease of the **central nervous system**" had spread in Minamata. Everyone was puzzled—what could be causing this horrible illness?



Minamata is a city on the Japanese island of Kyushu. Along the coast of the city is Minamata Bay, which connects with the Shiranui Sea.

# Clues to the Mystery

Doctors in Minamata hunted for clues to explain the disease. They soon made some startling discoveries.

**Residents** told them that before their loved ones became ill, cats in the area started behaving oddly. Some shrieked in pain, bumped into walls, or **convulsed** in the streets before dying. Others leapt into Minamata Bay, where they drowned. Residents called it “dancing cat disease.”

Cats in Japan



The people of Minamata had also seen crows **plummet** from the sky or crash into rocks. What was also strange were the hundreds of dead fish floating in Minamata Bay. Fish and **shellfish** were a big part of the residents' diet. Cats and birds ate the seafood, too. Doctors soon realized that the sick people and animals had one thing in common—they had all eaten seafood that came from the bay.



Small fish that have died



A dead crow on a beach



Japanese seaweed

Fish and shellfish weren't the only things that died in Minamata Bay. Investigators found that seaweed in the water had also stopped growing and died.